

Inside families

Laura Briggs, *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics: From Welfare Reform to Foreclosure to Trump* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017). 304 pp., £24.95 hb., £20.00 pb., 978 0 52028 191 2 hb., 978 0 52029 994 8 pb.

The shift to neoliberalism is rarely narrated from the vantage point of the household, but it is here – in the realm of unpaid bills and mounting laundry – that the contradictions of our political moment are felt most forcefully, writes Laura Briggs. Her US-focused book, *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics*, retells the story of neoliberal economics ‘from inside families’ and reframes its legacy through the lens of the care crisis. How did it get so hard, Briggs asks, to find the time and resources to do the necessary work of reproduction? The institutionalisation of the ‘double day’ – the site of one of feminism’s great unfinished battles – has, she observes, eroded Americans’ collective capacity to have and raise children, care for the elderly and support the sick and disabled. In Briggs’ account, the neoliberal economic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s curtailed the dissenting energies of twentieth-century radical protest movements: this is the historical moment at which ‘all politics became reproductive politics’. It is a controversial headline claim: after all, has there ever been a time under capitalism when ‘all politics’ were not shot through with the contradictions of social reproduction? The book never fully confronts this question, though it does paint a dynamic portrait of the structural contradictions that attend the contemporary organisation of care work in America.

Of course, to merely acknowledge the existence of a contemporary ‘care crisis’ is neither new nor necessarily radical. Briggs knows this: it is why she gives space in the first chapter to Gavin McInnes, the far-right founder of Vice Media, who told a *Fox News* host in 2015: ‘Feminism has made women miserable. Women were much happier when housewives were glorified.’ McInnes’ comment epitomises a historically illiterate right-wing narrative that blames feminism for the withdrawal of social support for domestic work. In fact, Briggs contends, feminists were central to a broad field of twentieth-century left-wing struggles around social reproduction, from the labour

movement fight for an eight-hour working day to the wages for housework campaigns and the Black Panthers’ free breakfast programmes. The book’s focus on the ‘deep, and intimate links – including failure and betrayal, but also support [and] solidarity’ across feminist, labour and racial justice movements is a powerful rejoinder to those who would reduce these movements to insipid calls for diverse boardrooms.

It is the truncation of such twentieth-century reproductive labour struggles that has brought us to the current precipice: a contemporary order in which it is ‘impossible for any member of a household to stay home and do reproductive labour, much less do paid work and still have the time, space, and resources to care for dependents, households, and communities’. This situation is new only in its generalisation to the whole population. Black women in America have been denied the rights, time or resources to mother their children since the era of enslavement, when, as Hortense Spillers states in her essay ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book’ (1987), ‘the female could not, in fact, claim her child’. One of the most compelling threads of Briggs’ book reveals how racism continues to function as a sticking plaster and alibi for the deficiencies of privatised care. Drawing on the work of Wahneema Lubiano, Briggs explores the construction of the ‘welfare queen’ stereotype as a ‘cover story for reducing government programs in general’: in short, teenage mothers were scapegoated so welfare could be gutted. The racist myth-making of the 1990s provided lessons for the financial crash of 2008, when banks courted Black, Latinx and female-headed households for subprime mortgages, then retrospectively smeared them as irresponsible borrowers who caused the recession.

If welfare reform rode the coat-tails of racist fear-mongering about so-called ‘cultures of poverty’, it did so in order to construct new moral imperatives around work in an era of wage stagnation. In the wake of these shifts, US immigration policy has overseen

a process of ‘offshoring’ reproductive labour. Briggs saliently points out that the management of migration to the US is ‘significantly a question about how household and child care work are getting done in the aftermath of the neoliberal push to get all mothers and other caregivers into the workforce for 40 and more hours a week’. Almost a million women migrants in the US, many of them undocumented, are employed as domestic workers and vulnerable to low wages, abuse by employers and chronic health problems. Joining the dots between anti-union laws, wage cuts and immigration control, Briggs shows that it is through racism that the system – barely – sustains itself.

New forms of what the book terms ‘structural infertility’ have developed along racialised lines too. Black infant and maternal mortality is roughly double the white rate – a disparity thought to endure across social classes, whether because of racism within the healthcare system or the toll of the everyday experience of being black in America. Briggs juxtaposes this disparity in mortality rates with the case of Silicon Valley, where wealthy and often white employees are urged to freeze their eggs on the company dollar and devote their fertile years to work. The book treads a careful line here: acknowledging that funding for and access to assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) is ‘precisely eugenic’ in its privileging of a majority white professional class, Briggs nevertheless maintains that black infant mortality and ARTs are two dimensions of the same trend: the rise of ‘involuntary, structural infertility as a result of economic changes and unsafe jobs’.

The final chapter turns to gay marriage, which resembles egg freezing as an ostensibly progressive policy that, in Briggs’ analysis, in fact bolsters the ‘privatisation of dependency’. Twentieth-century queer politics had imagined and enacted new configurations of kinship and community beyond the nuclear family. But by the end of the century, ‘the persistent, growing, and widespread absence of a social safety net together with active hostility from institutions like hospitals and schools to recognising gay kinship meant that, increasingly, family was the only obvious means for queer folks to care for dependents, and it needed to be a “legal” family.’ In this telling,

gay marriage expanded access to the nuclear family in order to further entrench it as the site of privatised and unremunerated reproductive labour.



Briggs is nostalgic for the radical visions of twentieth-century protest movements. As she writes, ‘While in many ways the sixties and seventies had been no better in reality, there had been optimism and momentum to build public support for care.’ But the book’s focus on the present moment of reproductive crisis evades a recognition that the disavowal of social reproduction has endured as a problem across all stages of capitalist development – that it is, in fact, a problem *produced* by capitalism. As Nancy Fraser puts it in ‘Crisis of Care?’, her contribution to Tithi Bhattacharya’s *Social Reproduction Theory* (2017), ‘the present crisis of social reproduction indicates something rotten not only in capitalism’s current, financialised form but in capitalist society per se.’ This rot, as Fraser outlines, can be detected in the ‘separate spheres’ ideology of the nineteenth century and the social democracy of the mid-twentieth century, as well as the present stage of financialised capitalism. Each era has developed a different way of organising

and naturalising the reproductive labour on which capital depends. Briggs defines reproductive labour as ‘the work necessary to the reproduction of human life’, but it is also, of course, the work necessary to the reproduction of capital: reproductive labour supplies new workers and replenishes their energies at the end of the day, all without commanding a wage. By conceptualising household labour as ‘the reproduction of things we value’, the book glosses over the tensions between the imperatives of capital and the desires, frustrations, projects, imaginaries and pleasures that stir outside or against those imperatives.

One result of this perspective is a tendency to flatten out the dissent internal to feminism, softening the edges of liberal-capitalist, socialist and Marxist feminisms to draw them all into a reformist consensus. The book mounts a surprising defence of two high-profile commentators on the ‘care crisis’: Facebook’s Sheryl Sandberg, who notoriously advised women to combat structurally sexist workplaces by ‘leaning in’ to power, and Anne-Marie Slaughter, the Obama administration policy director who has publicly criticised the structural barriers she had faced as a successful woman with children. To Briggs, both Sandberg and Slaughter have been unfairly maligned because they are ‘women talking about reproductive labour’ – but neither commentator has framed her intervention in these terms, perhaps because doing so would mean negotiating the antagonism between work-life balance reforms *within* capitalism and reproductive labour struggles *against* capitalism. While Briggs recognises the limitations of both women’s recommendations for reform, she does not pursue the deeper implications of this antagonism.

A similar flattening takes place in the book’s discussion of the wages for housework movement, which finds its revolutionary horizon reduced to a demand for a ‘40-hour workweek that enables people to get paid and still have time to do essential care work’. This description fails to capture the autonomist critique of work that drove the campaign. Wages for housework was also wages *against* housework, as Silvia Federici affirmed when she wrote: ‘To say that we want money for housework is the first step towards refusing to do it, because the demand for a wage makes our work visible, which is the most indispens-

able condition to begin to struggle against it, both in its immediate aspect as housework and its more insidious character as femininity’ (‘Wages Against Housework’, 1975). At its most radical moments, the campaign called not for more time to do housework, but for its abolition. The demand for wages, as antagonistic to the state as to the private home, was the impossible claim that would fracture the whole order of things. In her book *The Problem With Work* (2011), Kathi Weeks draws a parallel between wages for housework and contemporary movements for universal basic income (UBI). Like the demand for wages for housework, UBI has its reformist and its revolutionary modes, but in its strongest form it would detach the means to live and thrive from the system of waged work. Set against current debates around UBI, Briggs’ closing list of ‘things that would help’ – including a 40-hour workweek and school schedules to match – is striking for its timidity in the face of the crisis she has so cogently diagnosed.

The concept of wages against housework is valuable because it sutures a framework for resisting pronatalism to a critique of the devaluation of maternal labour. In ‘Women and the Subversion of the Community’, Selma James and Mariarosa Dalla Costa targeted the way ‘women have been forced to have children and were forbidden the right to have abortions when, as was to be expected, the most primitive techniques of birth control failed.’ Briggs, by comparison, tends to pit campaigns around abortion and contraception against struggles for the rights and resources to parent. She writes that ‘we have been debating abortion, birth control, and the means of preventing unwanted pregnancies vigorously and at length for two generations, but while we were looking there, many people lost the ability to have the children they wanted’. It is certainly true that reproductive rights activism has often been narrowly focused on abortion and contraception rights, which are too readily conceived in abstract legal terms and divorced from material circumstances. At the same time, the rights and access to abortion and contraception are extremely limited in the US and around the world – this is hardly a battle that has been won. Commenting on the conservative rollback of the welfare state and the removal of workplace protections

for pregnant women, Briggs writes, ‘This was the real war on women’. The comment not only risks downplaying the Trump administration’s renewed attack on the minimal freedoms secured by *Roe v. Wade*: it also misses an opportunity to show how pronatalism and anti-natalism reinforce each other. The task of a materialist feminism is, surely, to conceive of reproductive freedom as an expanded field in which child-rearing is chosen, not enforced; shared and resourced, not privatised; refused by some, taken up by others, and detached from gender roles, racist coercion and moralising imperatives.

How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics offers a valuable description of the social reproductive con-

traditions of the present state of things, and rightly emphasises the tightly bound relation of racism and reproductive politics. Briggs’ conception of the scope of change is, however, disappointingly narrow, especially compared to some of the historical movements it invokes. The book’s closing pages note that ‘even major corporations have long since realised that easing work/life burdens improves productivity’. In light of the immiserating social conditions sketched in this book, it is surely time to question whether the drive to improve productivity will ever be compatible with the movement for reproductive freedom.

Sophie Jones

Terror of the social

Galen Strawson, *Things That Bother Me: Death, Freedom, the Self, Etc.* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2018). 236pp., £11.99 pb., 978 1 68237 220 4

In his most recent book, apparently meant for a general audience and made up of essays previously appearing in non-scholarly publications, Galen Strawson has provided a nice recap of his general philosophical position. Most importantly, he has provided an opportunity to assess the relationship between philosophical discourse and what we might call common sense or everyday concepts. Strawson exactly captures the aporias and contradictions that are inherent, if often unnoticed, in the concepts with which we ordinarily operate in our everyday lives. However, I will also argue that we must treat these aporias and contradictions not as proven truths about reality, but as indications of where our common-sense understanding is in error. If we fail to notice these errors, as Strawson does, we are inevitably led to accept a certain amount of magical thinking and, more problematically, be convinced that we have no capacity to alter our lives, or the world, for the better.

Strawson is probably best known for his argument against free will, and so against the possibility of moral responsibility. In the introduction to *Things That Bother Me*, Strawson notes the angry response he has gotten to this argument over the years from those unable to refute it: ‘The virulence of the messages

suggests that those who send them think that the argument is sound, and this makes their anger a little odd ... after all, they hold the same view themselves’. Strawson’s rhetoric leads inexorably to conclusions most find troubling. However, few are able to interrogate the premises on which they are based, because they are premises on which almost everyone operates in everyday life. The point is that once we have accepted Strawson’s use of our own everyday conceptions of free will, consciousness and determinism, then his conclusions *are* irrefutable. We must then accept the absence of all agency, the concept of the mind as a passive observer, and, most absurdly of all, pansychism. However, if it is possible to examine these premises, so it is also possible to demonstrate the very different possibilities for human life that are revealed once we have corrected, or at least questioned, these assumptions.

In this collection, the concept of free will – the basis of Strawson’s most troubling and best known arguments – is most explicitly addressed in two essays: ‘Luck Swallows Everything’ and ‘You Cannot Make Yourself the Way You Are’. I take it that Strawson’s idea of free will in these essays is precisely the one most people do indeed ordinarily operate under. Put